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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 000483

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM CASC PGOV PREL KIRF CH

SUBJECT: TIBET TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS ON FOREIGNERS LIKELY  
THROUGH APRIL

REF: A. 08 BEIJING 1513  
¶B. 08 BEIJING 4092

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson.  
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) PRC authorities are barring most foreigners from traveling to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and many Tibetan areas outside the TAR, though the Chinese government has made no official announcement of this policy. One American contact with a long-standing TAR travel permit was recently denied boarding on a Beijing-Lhasa flight. Anecdotal evidence suggests the ban does not extend to all foreign long-term residents of Lhasa. Beijing-based travel agencies catering to foreigners did not expect travel permits to be available for March, though at least one company is booking tours for April. Travel companies in Qinghai Province reported conflicting information regarding travel restrictions to the Tibetan town of Yushu. In Gansu Province, travel companies reported that foreigners remain banned from Xiahe, home of the Labrang Monastery. End Summary.

Tibet: No Travel Permits until April (at Earliest)

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¶12. (C) An American businessman (protect) was prevented from boarding a flight from Beijing to Lhasa the week of February 16, despite having a valid, long-term travel permit for the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The American, who runs a business in the TAR and resides there part-time, told PolOff February 20 that he had already checked into the flight and was preparing to board when he was pulled aside at the last second for an "extra security check." Our contact said PRC authorities showed him a document, purportedly issued by the TAR government, announcing a temporary ban on foreign visitors. The businessman said he did not expect to return to Tibet until April. This ban, however, does not necessarily extend to all foreign residents of Lhasa. A contact at a European embassy in Beijing told ACSOff that an NGO worker who is a long-term Lhasa resident and a citizen of an EU country had reported no difficulty during his travel to and from the TAR earlier this month.

¶13. (C) Calls to Beijing travel agencies revealed a mixed awareness of travel restrictions surrounding the March 10 anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising. A manager at Wild China Travel (protect), which primarily organizes tours for non-Chinese, told PolOff February 18 that authorities had revoked

all of the agency's Tibet permits until the end of March "and possibly beyond." An agent at Great Tibet Tour (protect) reported that, while they had not received official notice of a travel ban, the company did not expect to send any tours to the TAR in March. The Great Tibet agent expressed confidence, however, that authorities would quickly reopen the region to foreigners and said the company was already booking tours for April. Travel companies catering to Chinese tourists typically had no knowledge of any restrictions and, based on our informal survey, March tour groups for Chinese citizens are proceeding as normal.

Localized Travel Bans in Tibetan Qinghai and Gansu

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¶4. (C) Three travel agencies based in Xining, Qinghai Province, had different information regarding March travel bans. An agent at China International Travel Service (CITS) said he had not heard of any restrictions on foreigners traveling to the Tibetan communities of Tongren and Yushu (both places that were closed to foreigners in the weeks following the outbreak of unrest last March, ref A). The CITS agent said foreigners would need a permit issued by the Qinghai Public Security Bureau to visit Yushu, which is close to the TAR border, but indicated acquiring such documents would not be a problem. (Comment: Foreigners traveling on the Tibetan plateau in Qinghai technically require such a permit, though these rules are selectively

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enforced.) Kang Hui Travel in Xining gave a similar response, but the Xia Zhi Lu agency said foreigners would be barred outright from Yushu in March, though Tongren would remain open.

¶5. (C) By contrast, travel companies in Lanzhou, Gansu Province, were unanimous in stating that foreigners remain barred from the Tibetan town of Xiahe. Xiahe, home to the Labrang Monastery, is a major tourist attraction in Gansu. Two Lanzhou-based tour agents separately told PolOff that authorities had never reopened Xiahe following last year's riots, and they expected the ban to remain through March. (Comment: PolOff visited Xiahe in September but was told to leave after a few hours, ref B). An agent at Lanzhou's Jinqiao travel agency told PolOff that he expected Gansu officials to announce a new policy governing foreign travel to Xiahe in April.

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